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Mladen Lišanin*

Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade

The Reshaping of Global Relations in the 21st Century: Multiple World Orders?

Abstract

After almost half a century of fundamentally stable structure of international system during the Cold War, and with an intermezzo in the form of the “unipolar moment” immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the first decades of the twenty first century brought about a series of turbulences and cued deep reshaping of the global relations. Unable to achieve or maintain the global- or block-level hegemony at the scale which had been attainable within the bipolar and multipolar systems of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, the great powers predominantly fight to consolidate their positions within their respective spheres of influence, whether these are designated geographically (as regions) or functionally (as domains). On its own part, this has initiated the development of concepts like the “multi-order world” (Trine Flockhart), and multiplicity in international relations (Milja Kurki, Justin Rosenberg). Although these and similar concepts take up positions critical towards the traditional positivist theoretical approaches, it can be stated that, at the same time, they reaffirm them: while aspiring to transcend the embedded disciplinary boundaries, they necessarily, although most often unwillingly, affirm the significance of the state as not just the key actor, but also as the key reference framework for constituting the very notion of “the international”. Similarly, the aforementioned historical and theoretical-methodological changes in the study of global relations produce immediate consequences for our understanding of international realities, as well as for our presuppositions on the directions of its future development. By combining the traditional, dominantly realist postulates with the ctitiques and innovations put forward by contemporary approaches to the study of

* mladen.lisanin@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs

international politics, the author aspires to shed light on some of the key aspects of the reshaping of contemporary global relations.

Keywords:

global relations, international politics, hegemony, world order, multiplicity, realism, post-positivism

INTRODUCTION

Discussions on the changes of global order have traditionally pervaded International Relations scholarship following major political tumults, intense crises, or other international critical junctures. This was true after the World Wars and the Cold War, and it is no less true in the post-unipolar period the world currently finds itself in.[1] After almost half a century of fundamentally stable structure of international system during the Cold War, and with an intermezzo in the form of „the unipolar moment" immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the first decades of the twenty first century brought about a series of turbulences and cued deep reshaping of the global relations[2] – conditions marked by the re-opening of the (geopolitical) Grand Casino.[3] Terrorist attacks on US soil in 2001 followed by the onset of what was to become America's longest war (Afghanistan), the rise of new major actors like China, a series of great power armed interventions of questionable legality and dubious prudence or success rate (most notably Iraq, Libya, Syria, Georgia, Ukraine), as well as a number of calamities and disasters in the areas of economy and finance, migration, or public health, have all contributed to the circumstances wherein the global system has kept undergoing profound changes since the beginning of the century.

Obviously, the impending changes in system polarity seem like the most consequential ones. Still, apart from reshaping the system structure as defined by major actors' capabilities, the whirlwind of significant global events has impacted great powers' respective perceptions of their own, and their rival's positions and interests. Such a peculiar form of post-unipolar global competition propels major powers to redefine the scope of their

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1 Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1, 1990/1991, pp. 23–33.

2 Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited", *The National Interest*, No. 70, 2002/2003, pp. 5–18.

3 C. Dale Walton, *Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: Multipolarity and the Revolution in Strategic Perspective*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, pp. 39–49.

impact: the struggle for global influence is increasingly formulated as a struggle to influence outcomes in one's own critically important portion of the international system. In other words, unable to achieve or maintain the global- or block-level hegemony at the scale which had been attainable within the bipolar and multipolar systems of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, the great powers predominantly fight to consolidate their positions within their respective spheres of influence. Such spheres may be designated geographically – as regions, or functionally – as domains. On its own part, this has initiated the development of innovative IR concepts, tools and frameworks like the "multi-order world" (Trine Flockhart), and multiplicity in international relations (Milja Kurki, Justin Rosenberg).[4] Such innovations question both the notions of centrality of the state as the key actor of international affairs, as well as the idea of the global system as the framework within which we observe and understand major issues of international relations. At the same time, as will be shown, they somewhat paradoxically reinforce the pervasive understanding of the state as the crux of international reality, not least by implicitly utilizing it as a frame of reference in devising novel conceptions about the structure of global politics.

Still dominantly determined by the number and capabilities of its major actors, such structure, as noted before, remains shaped by policies of great powers. The distinction between *status quo* and revisionist powers has been somewhat distorted in the post-unipolar era, mostly since the global structure has become increasingly dispersed: major powers can now be upholders of status quo in some regions/domains and revisionist actors and others. They can also be status quo powers at the system level, and revisionist actors within specific regions/domains: this is particularly typical of the United States, given its unique position as the former unipole: while struggling to maintain its status of a global hegemon, it pursued revisionist policies in regions such as the Balkans or North Africa and domains like international trade, particularly post-2017. At the same time, possessing large capabilities obviously does not automatically translate into power, understood as ability to induce outcomes which affect the system structure, whether the goal is to maintain or alter it. Therefore, some authors have proposed the concept of structural power – "the authority and capacity to set the rules of the game and to determine howe the others will play the game. Those who attempt to play other games can be persuaded or coerced to conform only by those with superior structural

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4 Trine Flockhart, "The Coming Multi-order World", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2016, pp. 3–30; Milja Kurki and Justin Rosenberg, "Multiplicity: a new common ground for international theory?", *Globalizations*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2020, pp. 397–403.

power".[5] However, to be in a position[6] to exert structural power in the first place, an actor still needs to be a state, and a powerful one: a great power.

New IR scholarship demonstrates attempts at theoretical innovation, but its significant share remains deeply embedded in traditional realist approaches. According to Rosato and his "intentions pessimism" theory, great powers are destined to compete because they "encounter extraordinary difficulties accessing firsthand information about each other's current and future intentions", so "they can rarely if ever trust their peers". Diverging from Rosato's structurally informed strain of realism and advocating a classical realist perspective, Kirshner stipulates that "states, especially great powers, make basic international political choices, choices that are profoundly shaped by their historical experiences, ideational frameworks, and ideological dispositions".[7] Still, new concepts and research programs witness that the need persists to reach beyond the existing theoretical and paradigmatic limits of the discipline. Many of them are devised specifically to assess the changes brought about by the ongoing dispersion and diversification of the international order.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE GLOBAL SYSTEM: MULTIPLE ORDERS?

Traditionally, international orders have been dominantly distinguished by the distribution of power, i.e., the number of states with sufficient capabilities to act as poles within the system, thus crucially shaping political outcomes. Undoubtedly, distribution of power remains a crucial feature of contemporary international order, but as it becomes increasingly hard to identify poles, as well as with amplified problems in great power communication, we have been witnessing the increase in regional blocs with structures of their own. These blocs sometimes show features of emerging mid-level orders, and may be the result of authentic, grass-roots initiatives by regional players, as well as of great power meddling and design. The functions such orders play make them not only a level of analysis of international politics, but almost a kind of unitary actors in and of themselves. Such proliferation further complicates the already turbulent state of contemporary international system. Henry

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5 Kalevi Jaako Holsti, *International Politics: a Framework for Analysis, 7th Edition*, Prentice Hall [NJ], 1995, p. 69.

6 Sebastian Rosato, *Intentions in Great Power Politics*, Yale University Press, New Haven [CT] – London, 2021, p. 43.

7 Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton [NJ] – Oxford, 2022, p. 42.

Kissinger has rightly noted that the "contemporary quest for world order will require a coherent strategy to establish a concept of order within the various regions, and to relate these regional orders to one another. These goals are not necessarily identical or self-reconciling: the triumph of a radical movement might bring order to one region while setting the stage for turmoil in and with all others. The domination of a region by one country militarily, even if it brings the appearance of order, could produce a crisis for the rest of the world."[8]

In Kissinger's classical view, to be stable, international political orders need to rest not just upon a sustainable balance of power, but also upon an internalized sense of legitimacy of the order within the powers maintaining it. Herrmann's theory of motivated reasoning, informed by social psychology, stipulates that preferences, such as attachment of social identity to the country, shape beliefs about international politics.[9] In the current, rather unstable international constellation, the globally observed pre-existing preferences seem to be more firmly attached to the notions of sovereignty and the nation-state than was the case immediately after the end of the Cold War. This means that the positions of systemic legitimacy will largely be measured against its correspondence to these reemerging values.

Given great powers' mixed record of shaping and sustaining the international order throughout modern history, it is probably natural that middle and smaller powers increasingly tend to hedge and turn to bottom-up regional cooperation as a means to achieving basing security and prosperity instead of relying solely on external, top-down design. Dragan Simić notes that, while the contemporary world order is closer to the constitution of separate regions as clusters of power than to the establishment of global institutions, this does not automatically guarantee that interests of middle and small states within such regions would be more efficiently protected.[10]

Existing global rifts go far beyond the established historical patterns of discord and collaboration. It is precisely the fact that there seem to be no satiated major actors that makes contemporary international order so volatile. As Menon correctly observes, there are currently no clear-cut status quo forces. Instead, all the key players are revisionist to a larger or lesser extent: "if major powers harbor doubts about the rules-based order, weaker countries have steadily lost faith in the legitimacy and fairness of the international system. This is certainly true of countries in the global South. They have seen the

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8 Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, Penguin Press, New York [NY], 2014, p. 371.

9 Richard K. Herrmann, "How Attachments to the Nation Shape Beliefs About the World: A Theory of Motivated Reasoning", *International Organization,* Vol. 71, No. S1, 2017, pp. S61–S84.

10 Dragan R. Simić, *Rasprava o poretku*, Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd, 2012, p. 322.

UN, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization, G-20, and others fail to act on issues of development and, more urgently, the debt crisis plaguing developing countries – a crisis made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and food and energy inflation caused by the Ukraine war".[11] States will respond to pervasive revisionism by turning inward od forming ad hoc coalitions. This produces incentives for proliferation of new security arrangements and alliances, as well as other types of regional political frameworks.[12] At the same time, great powers (self)perceived as "civilizational states", including, but not limited to China and Russia, propose models of order which challenge older, Western-dominated structures.[13]

Such developments, as usual, open the question of whether the existing theoretical schools and concepts offer adequate tools to grasp the novel intricacies of order transformation. Scholars of various provenances have put forward diverse proposals, more or less grounded in previous IR scholarship. Although some of them aspire to transcend the nation-state as the main reference point, they end up vindicating it as long as the understanding of the international element keeps relating to societal relations transpiring across the borders of territorially organized, sovereign structures – regardless of the changes the concepts of territoriality or sovereignty have undergone over the one century-course of IR's development as a discipline.

THE EMERGENCE OF INNOVATIVE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

As asserted in an earlier work, "as the international system changes, so do the tools for its assessment. One way of conducting such a change is for each theory to sharpen its own research tools by devising additional hypotheses in response to new empirical challenges, while conserving the theoretical 'hard core', i. e. the set of its main assumptions – in Lakatosian terms, this would represent an intra-paradigmatic problemshift. Another way is to alter the very

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11 Shivshankar Menon, "Nobody Wants the Current World Order", *Foreign Affairs*, August 3, 2022, Available from: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/nobody-wants-current-world-order.

12 Bruno Tertrais, *Entangling Alliances? Europe, the United States, Asia, and the Risk of New 1914*, The Atlantic Council, Washington, D.C., 2022, pp. 10–14.

13 Adrian Pabst, *Liberal World Order and Its Critics: Civilizational States and Cultural Commonwealths*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2019, pp. 50–54.

core of the theory, thus changing its very nature to the extent that it becomes something genuinely new (inter-paradigmatic shift)".[14]

Although often particularly innovative and original, the newest attempts at offering conceptual tools which would transcend existing paradigmatic faults are by no means a pioneering effort. It would be nearly impossible to refer to all the instances of struggles towards paradigmatic innovation. For instance, studying the prospects for international cooperation outside the hegemonic framework in the 1980s, Robert Keohane famously put forth a theory of non-hegemonic cooperation as an approach which would "build an institutionalist edifice on a realist foundation", supplementing but not replacing the erstwhile dominant realist theories.[15] Somewhat later, Viotti and Kauppi are known to have pursued an endeavor to reassess and transcend the major IR paradigms, identifying four major trends in innovative theory-building: the disrepute of pure empiricism, heightened awareness of the importance of the system structure, growing interest in the historical development of key concepts, and greater emphasis on theoretical rigor.[16] Contemporary efforts often build on previous scholarly attempts, if sometimes only implicitly.

Writing in 2016, Trine Flockhart offered one of the most succinctly put reassessments of existing tools for grasping crucial issues of contemporary international order, introducing the concept of a "multi-order world". According to her, international orders are founded upon four distinctive components: power, identity, and primary and secondary institutions, whereas primary institutions are "patterns of shared practices rooted in the values held commonly by the members of the order and embodying a mix of norms, rules and principles", and secondary institutions represent a more or less formalized "institutional architecture designed to manage relations between states within the international society and provide an organizational setting for meeting common challenges and for providing public goods within the order and in the wider system".[17] This goes for all conceivable

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14 Mladen Lišanin, "Possibilities of Assessing the Changing Nature of International Politics in the Coming Multi-Order World", *Croatian Political Science Review*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2017, p. 154.

15 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy, 2nd Edition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton [NJ] – Oxford, 2005, pp. x, 14.

16 Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, *International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism, Globalism, and Beyond, 3rd Edition*, Allyn and Bacon, Needham Heights [MA], 1999, pp. 430–431.

17 Trine Flockhart, "The Coming Multi-order World", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2016, pp. 15–16.

iterations of international orders, including unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar ones. What is different about the impending changes towards a multi-order world, however, is that the new "primary dynamics are likely to be within and between different orders, rather than between multiple sovereign states".[18]

The concept of multiplicity in International Relations scholarship has emerged at a similar time, largely based on Rosenberg's proposition that IR has an inherent issue of functioning within a "borrowed ontology", having emerged from Politics or Political Science, instead of constituting itself as a "discipline in its own right": one which would focus on the problematique of the very notion of the international. This would encompass acknowledging that human existence is it is distributed across numerous interacting societies, which makes the notion of societal multiplicity a disciplinary starting point.[19]

Milja Kurki offers a wider, looser, and more expansive understanding of multiplicity: according to her, "central to multiplicity, from multiple perspectives, seems to be 'co-determination', or 'co-becoming', with others; a kind of precarity, or vulnerability, or exposure to others. What multiplicity highlights so well then is, I believe, the dynamics and opportunities created by the condition of exposure to others in relations".[20] She previously assesses how existing theories, approaches, and schools such as realism, liberalism, social constructivism, post-colonialism, and others, have engaged with issues of multiplicity, or how such issues may be "read into" them.

When responding to criticism that the concept of multiplicity as proposed by Rosenberg is prisoned by Waltzian spatial conceptions and thus guilty of methodological nationalism, Tallis asserts that "multiplicity posits a notion of the international, as a particular, contingent and non-monopolistic historical form of inter-societal multiplicity".[21] He proceeds: "the thoroughgoing interpenetration (again: interaction, combination and dialectical change) of these societies, in their diversity and with scant respect to borders or the dominance of state actors (...), should dispel notions that this reproduces a Waltzian world or a territorial trap." And while the accusations of methodological nationalism are certainly out of place when it comes to multiplicity, there is more than a semblance of truth to the idea that, by trying

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18 Trine Flockhart, "The Coming Multi-order World", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2016, p. 23.

19 Justin Rosenberg, "International Relations in the Prison of Political Science", *International Relations*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2016, passim.

20 Kurki, Milja, "Multiplicity expanded: IR theories, multiplicity, and the potential of trans-disciplinary dialogue", *Globalizations*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2020, p. 569.

21 Benjamin Tallis, "Multiplicity: Taking Responsibility for the International", *New Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2019, p. 170.

to transcend the state as the crucial form of actorness, multiplicity does, in fact, vindicate it through its conception of the international.

In comparison to Flockhart's notion of a multi-order world, approaches based on the concept of multiplicity are less material and more domain-oriented, as they attempt to grasp the international as a spectrum of inter-societal relations across a multitude of spheres, including the seemingly non-political ones such as art, music, or architecture. In other words, they are more assertive in their effort to transcend territoriality as a key feature of existing approaches studying the international system. The paradox of such an attempt is that it is only as successful as it pertains to the very framework it tries to overcome: a plethora of relations occurring not just across social domains, but across territorially conceived borders of sovereign nation-states.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is not unusual that deep turbulences announcing the shifts within the international system induce the formulation of innovative theoretical paradigms, which may subsequently have a mixed record of success in assessing crucial global issues and developments. The newest scholarly approaches are, thus, yet to be tested against international realities which will emerge from the perpetual conundrum marking international relations over the first two decades of the twenty-first century. It may well turn out that the best chance to succeed is to set innovative concepts upon the groundwork provided by the existing and more traditional approaches, instead of pursuing innovation for the sake of innovation.

Per Cornelia Baciu, for instance, what is needed to properly grasp the issues of contemporary order, is not necessarily an entirely new paradigm, but a way to better bridge the three levels on which the existing approaches operate: the international level, the national level, and the citizen level. She offers the concept of "interpolarity" as a general framework for such an endeavor; an international order wherein interdependent poles of different sizes, epitomized by states, inter-governmental organizations, non-state actors, and other agents interact.[22] This would entail the acknowledgement of multiple poles as well as their diverging capacities, which makes it distinct from major realist views on power distribution. Also, the concept recognizes the importance of the dynamics of relations between such uneven poles, making it sensitive enough to the issue of agency of lesser powers, which is yet another problem that traditional IR approaches have not always been

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22 Cornelia Baciu, "Interpolarity. Re-visiting Security and the Global Order", *Defence Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2022, pp. 572, 576.

successful at solving. The last two major global crises – Covid19 pandemic and Russian war against Ukraine – have compellingly demonstrated of taking such nuance into account.

For instance, crucial rifts in trans-Atlantic relations have been overcome or at least concealed after the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine; still, it would be injudicious to assume that they are permanently removed.[23] The longer the conflict lasts, the bigger the risk of dissonance among allies, within the EU as well as in trans-Atlantic context. Simultaneously, the differences between the West, its political structures and allies, and the rest of the World epitomized by BRICs and most countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, have been amplified since February 2022. This was succinctly highlighted by the Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in June, at the GlobSec Forum in Bratislava, Slovakia. Reflecting on India's reluctance to side with the Western position on Russia and Ukraine, he commented that "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems".[24] The issue of major powers' persisting conviction that they are entitled to conformity by lesser powers, particularly those in the Global South is underlying such misunderstandings.

The issue of spheres of influence infamously figures in the discussions of the dissipating global order. Spheres of influence are widely viewed as either an unfortunate remnant of the past or an unacceptable policy course of malign actors questioning the value of rules-based international order. It is, however, hard to think about the world of emerging regional blocs or topical coalitions without considering major power aspirations to exert control therein. O'Rourke and Shifrinson make it clear that, regardless of one's one stance on the acceptability of spheres of influence in contemporary international politics, they undoubtedly exist as "descriptive statements reflecting the geographic boundaries wherein states are unwilling or unable to challenge another's dominance, given both the balance of power and balance of interests", before proceeding to assess the costs and benefits of having such arrangements among major powers.[25]

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23 Lišanin Mladen, "Biden Administration's Transatlantic Challenge", *Politika nacionalne bezbednosti*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 24.

24 Lan Jianxue, "Jaishankar's remarks reflect India's objections to European centralism", Global Times, June 3, 2022, Available from: https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1267313.shtml, (Accessed 7 August 2022).

25 Lindsey O'Rourke and Joshua Shifrinson, "Squaring the Circle on Spheres of Influence: The Overlooked Benefits", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2022, p. 107.

On the other side of paradigm/policy spectrum, G. John Ikenberry offers what may be defined as an overly optimistic view of contemporary international order and the US position therein: "The United States enters today's struggle to shape the twenty-first century with profound advantages. It still possesses the vast bulk of the material capabilities it had in earlier decades. It remains uniquely positioned geographically to play a great-power role in both East Asia and Europe. Its ability to work with other liberal democracies to shape global rules and institutions is already manifest in its response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and will stand it in good stead in any future collective response to Chinese aggression in East Asia. Although China and Russia seek to move the world in the direction of regional blocs and spheres of influence, the United States has offered a vision of world order based on a set of principles rather than competition over territory."

Neither the historical record, nor the ongoing development of current events, however, seem to corroborate such claims. It is hardly provable that Russian, let alone Chinese actions, are a key determinant in the shift towards a more dispersed world order, of which regional blocks are but one, albeit important, feature.[26] Russian policies may be explained by a twofold endeavor: on one side, to consolidate its position of an undisputed hegemon in the "near abroad", as well as to find a place in a wider construction of European and global security architecture – a place which would entail the status of an equal among the system-shaping great powers. These prospects have, at least in the short to medium term, been seriously hampered by the Ukraine invasion. As for China, it is increasingly clear that it perceives itself as a power which has outgrown its immediate region and is prepared to pursue policies of global reach – particularly in the sphere of economy. Supporting regional blocks will not necessarily be a part of this strategy; it will only occur to the extent it supports Chinese global ambitions.

Rodrik and Walt also recognize the manifold centrifugal forces and the tendency towards fragmentation of the international order: "looking ahead, it is easy to imagine a less prosperous and more dangerous world characterized by an increasingly hostile United States and China, a remilitarized Europe, inward-oriented regional economic blocs, a digital realm divided along geopolitical lines, and the growing weaponization of economic relations for strategic ends."[27] Being aware of all the ways in which the erstwhile "partially liberal, rules-based system" has contributed its own demise, they propose a much more restrained framework as a remedy: a "meta-regime" within

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26 G. John Ikenberry, "Why American Power Endures", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 101, No. 6, 2022, p. 72.

27 Rodrik, Dani and Stephen M. Walt, "How to Build a Better Order: Limiting Great Power Rivalry in an Anarchic World", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 101, No. 5, 2022, pp. 144, 146.

which the major powers "need not agree in advance on the detailed rules that would govern their interactions", instead achieving a "minimal consensus on core principles."[28] This would obviously entail the recognition of opposing interests of major players, as well as different domains and regions in which they are to be pursued. Rodrik's and Walt's proposal thus combines features of a more traditional, realism-embedded approaches, as well as institutionalism-driven instinct for cooperation and "strategic transparency". It is, therefore, something of an echo of Keohane's proposal from the 1980s, calibrated to account for the newest issues and challenges facing the international system. The concept seems rational and plausible, although it will certainly face fierce opposition from various sides, since no major actor or block seems willing to forfeit the maximalist causes for the sake of uncertain gains from subjugating oneself to pre-arranged set of rules, however minimally conceived.

Historically, international orders have been made through peroilous and often unpopular political bargains.[29] It would hardly be surprising if the outcome of the next grand bargain would not be a world order, but a world of multiple orders. Equally unpopular to grasp, such development has equal chances of being a chance for a thorough restart, or a road to demise, with leading powers in the system having the final say.

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28 Rodrik, Dani and Stephen M. Walt, "How to Build a Better Order: Limiting Great Power Rivalry in an Anarchic World", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 101, No. 5, 2022, pp. 144, 146.

29 Dragan R. Simić, *Svetski poredak: politika Vudroa Vilsona i Frenklina Delana Ruzvelta*, Clio, Beograd, 2022, p. 170.

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